

FROM DAMSEL IN DISTRESS TO COMPLETE WOMEN: DECONSTRUCTING GENDER ROLE IN INDIAN ADVERTISING AND MEDIA

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Abstract

The very definition of the advertisement states that it is nothing, but the information provided to persuade people to buy something. However, underneath the innocent covers of capitalistic mindset, it does more than just displaying their product, they function as subtle architects, shaping our understanding of social norms and gender roles respectively, which leads to stereotyping, creating gender bias, leading to the sexual division of labor and the likes. Their persuasive power extends far beyond simply promoting products. Consumers appear as statistics catered for a hierarchical range of 'conspicuous production' of blatant cash investment, thus, advancing the rule of complete quantification. Beneath the veneer of glossy visuals and catchy slogans lies a carefully constructed narrative. This narrative reinforces a predetermined division of labor, where men and women occupy distinct spheres, The research aims to present this rhetoric and questions the whole idea behind the mass-produced portrayal of this gendered identity. The consequences are far-reaching, limiting individual choices, hindering personal growth, and perpetuating an unequal status quo. Images of women nurturing families and men conquering boardrooms solidify these stereotypes, creating a pervasive bias that permeates our society. The research paper examines advertising's portrayal of women exemplifies the concerning trend of reinforcing traditional gender roles. The research deals with highlighting the gender bias and portrayal of females in perpetuating the defined heteronormative 'gendered actions' assigned to the sexed body. Women are consistently depicted as confined to the domestic sphere, responsible for the unpaid labor of maintaining the household. This constructed image paints them as the "angels of the house," solely dedicated to caring for family members, particularly the "industrious (paid) man" returning home from a long day's work, who is the center of the house. Significantly, it is imperative to recognize this insidious power of advertising and challenge its gendered messaging. By fostering critical thinking and demanding inclusive representation, we can work towards a future where advertisements empower rather than confine.

Keywords: Feminist Media Study, Gender Roles, Heteronormativity, Media Literacy, Consumerism and Gender Bias

INTRODUCTION

Advertising weaves itself into the fabric of our lives, a constant presence on billboards, screens, and even the radio waves that lull us to sleep. Beyond the dazzling visuals and clever wordplay lies a force with a far deeper influence: the power to shape populations and buying behaviors. Advertisements are not mere product announcements; they are storytellers, crafting narratives of happiness, success, and even love. The woman with cascading hair using a specific shampoo becomes the embodiment of beauty, while the man behind the wheel of a certain car exudes an aura of confidence and power. These carefully constructed narratives seep into our subconscious, subtly influencing our desires and aspirations.

Advertising's influence extends beyond the individual. Over time, it can subtly sculpt societal norms. The persistent portrayal of a particular family structure or a rigid division of gender roles can color our perception of ourselves and the world around us. This influence is akin to a sculptor meticulously shaping societal expectations. Exposure is the lifeblood of advertising. The more frequently we encounter an image or slogan, the more familiar and trustworthy it becomes. This relentless repetition fosters a sense of brand loyalty and can even trick us into believing a product is essential, even if the desire for it was previously nonexistent. Children, with their developing minds, are particularly susceptible to this persuasive tactic.

But the persuasive power of advertising does not rely solely on repetition. Modern advertising has become an expert in personalization. By leveraging demographic and psychological data, advertisers craft messages that resonate with specific audiences. Social media platforms, with their intimate knowledge of our online behavior,

allow for advertisements that feel tailor-made to our deepest desires and insecurities. This tadections approach can be remarkably effective, influencing buying decisions we might not have otherwise considered. The impact of advertising transcends the realm of mere sales. It has the power to shape how we view ourselves, our communities, and even the world at large. This influence can be a force for good, promoting healthy habits or social causes. However, it can also be manipulative, reinforcing stereotypes and creating unrealistic expectations. As Theodor Adorno explains the very tendency of this capitalistic model in his essay *The Cultural Industry*, where - "The man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him. Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him." (Adorno, *The Cultural Industry*) Advertising is a powerful siren song, and understanding its impact on both populations and buying behaviors is crucial. By remaining aware of its persuasive tactics, we can navigate the world of advertising with a critical eye, ensuring we are not simply swayed by a carefully crafted story, but making informed choices that reflect our own desires and needs.

The Gendered Canvas: Advertising's Subtle Symphony

As already suggested, Advertising, a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives, transcends the mere promotion of products. It acts as a maestro, conducting a subtle symphony of societal expectations through the vibrant tapestry of commercials and billboards. Absorbed from a young age, these messages shape our understanding of masculinity and femininity, often constructing a rigid binary, examining how it subtly constructs and reinforces these limiting gender roles.

The first movement in this symphony is the introduction of familiar archetypes. Advertising thrives on a repertoire of characters that have become synonymous with our expectations of gender. The "domestic goddess," bathed in the warm glow of domestic bliss, extols the virtues of a cleaning product, her perfectly coiffed hair and pristine apron a testament to her unwavering dedication to the hearth. Juxtaposed against this image is the rugged explorer, a determined figure with a steely gaze, conquering a mountain peak in his powerful SUV. These stereotypical portrayals become the brushstrokes on the canvas, a constant reminder of the supposedly "natural" spheres men and women should occupy. This reinforces a binary view of gender, tragically limiting the vibrant spectrum of possibilities for both sexes. It dictates to women that their primary domain lies within the confines of the home, wielding feather dusters as their weapons of choice. Their nurturing instincts, advertising implies, are best suited to a spotless kitchen and a picture-perfect family. Men, on the other hand, are relegated to the roles of breadwinners and adventurers, their masculinity defined by their ability to conquer the wilderness, navigate the corporate jungle, and return home triumphant, ready to be waited on by their domestic partners. This rigid portrayal not only stifles individual potential but also reinforces outdated societal expectations. It hinders progress towards a more equitable distribution of labor and a broader definition of what it means to be a man or a woman.

The impact of advertising extends far beyond the immediate purchase. It shapes the very foundation of societal norms. When a particular family structure or division of labor is persistently presented as the ideal, it influences how we perceive ourselves and navigate our relationships. Advertising can even perpetuate harmful stereotypes, portraying women as overly emotional or men as incapable of nurturing. These distorted images can lead to a sense of inadequacy and hinder personal growth for all genders.

The Duality of the Feminine: Advertising's Masterpiece

Advertising portrays women as its central performers. However, the melody it plays is a jarring duet, portraying women as both alluring sex symbols and idealized mothers, rarely acknowledging the rich spectrum of femininity in between. The contradictory portrayal of females in advertisements, highlighting the objectification inherent in using them as sex symbols and the limitations imposed by glorifying them solely as mothers. One movement in this symphony features the "femme fatale," a trope used to sell everything from cars to perfume. This archetype presents women as objects of desire, their bodies hyper-sexualized and often disconnected from the product itself. A woman with flowing hair emerges from a sports car, or a scantily clad model leans suggestively against a bottle of fragrance – these images reduce women to mere vessels for male attention, reinforcing the notion that their primary value lies in their physical attractiveness. A prime example is a recent ad for a fairness cream featuring a Bollywood actress cavorting suggestively in a bathtub filled with the product. The camera lingers on her flawless complexion and curvaceous figure, while the supposed benefits of the fairness cream are relegated to voiceover and superimposed text. Here, the woman's body becomes the primary focus, her intellect and individuality rendered irrelevant. This portrayal not only reinforces the notion that a woman's primary value lies in her physical attractiveness but also creates unrealistic beauty standards that can damage self-esteem, particularly amongst young girls bombarded with these images. These unrealistic standards can lead to body image issues, eating disorders, and a constant feeling of inadequacy. The pressure to conform to this narrow definition of beauty can be immense, not just for young women but for women of all ages. Furthermore, this trope perpetuates the idea that women's bodies are public property, existing for the

male gaze and consumption. It contributes to a culture that normalizes sexual harassment and objectification of women.

The portrayal of women in the ads of detergent powder is a fine example of the aforementioned points. It is the females who are depicted when it comes to displaying the household and unpaid work of washing clothes. It is a woman who is shown under this very constructed domestic sphere with the idea that she is the angel of the house and it is her responsibility to wash the clothes of her family member, who is usually in most cases, the 'hard working (paid) man', who is coming home after his very long day at work (therefore, his clothes are dirty). Hema, Rekha, Jaya, and Sushma, the very famous names, made even more famous by the advertisement of one of the leading detergent ads are all names of females. Hence, it should be Hema, Rekha, Jaya, and Sushma washing the clothes and not Dharmendra, Mukesh, Amitabh, or Swaraj. This stereotypical mindset that only the females should be doing the household chores, which in this case, is the washing of clothes is depicted in numerous advertisements of detergent powders.

What is more surprising to analyze is how these ads which look so innocent on top are actually promoting the patriarchal cycle of the division of labor which designates women at the center of the household, thus, limiting her boundaries, she is shown and glorified on most of the occasions as she knows it all- how to take out a stain of a juice to the pickle oil.

These advertisements not just tell you that it is the females who shall be washing the clothes, but also goes on to tell you as to what attire that female should be wearing while doing so. These ads go on to underline the moral code about a female while constructing a modest picture of her identity as what attire a woman, who is a wife, the mother should be wearing in order not only to wash the clothes but about promoting the product. That portrayal would go on to define the very identity of a woman - 'modest one' who is modest only when with the other work, does the unpaid job of washing the clothes and wears a sari, salwar suit, or short kurtas with formal pants in case of modern women, especially who is a little bit richer and could afford a washing machine. Even in the high budget ads which use washing machines, a woman and only a woman can start or push the start button of the machine. Though the machine lessens human labor but then also a woman is only needed to start it.

On the other hand, another movement celebrates women as the quintessential mothers and homemakers. Advertisements depict women in pristine kitchens, effortlessly juggling domestic duties with a radiant smile. This portrayal, while seemingly positive, confines women to the domestic sphere, perpetuating outdated gender roles. These ads imply that a woman's fulfillment is found solely in nurturing and cleanliness, ignoring the vast array of ambitions and aspirations women may possess. This glorification of the "domestic goddess" can be particularly harmful to working mothers, who may already struggle with societal pressures surrounding work-life balance. Countless advertisements depict women in pristine kitchens, effortlessly juggling domestic duties with a radiant smile. A popular example is a long-running soap brand campaign featuring a woman effortlessly managing a household while her husband struggles with basic chores. While seemingly positive on the surface, this portrayal confines women to the domestic sphere, perpetuating outdated gender roles. These ads imply that a woman's fulfillment is found solely in nurturing and cleanliness, ignoring the vast array of ambitions and aspirations women may possess. This glorification of the "domestic goddess" can be particularly harmful to working mothers, who already struggle with societal pressures surrounding work-life balance. The message reinforces the notion that a woman's natural place is in the home, regardless of her education, qualifications, or personal desires. This can lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy for women who choose to pursue careers outside the home, or who simply do not find domesticity fulfilling. Furthermore, it places the burden of childcare and housework solely on women, even when both partners are working full-time. This unequal distribution of labor not only creates resentment but also hinders women's professional advancement. The portrayal of women solely as mothers also erases the experiences of women who are childless by choice or circumstance. These advertisements imply that motherhood is the ultimate goal for all women, and that a woman's life is incomplete without children. This can be insensitive and hurtful to women who face challenges with fertility, or who simply do not desire children. The narrow definition of femininity presented in these ads excludes a significant portion of the female population, including women who choose to focus on their careers, women who are single by choice, women in same-sex relationships, and women who experience miscarriage or early loss. Furthermore, it can be isolating for women who are struggling with infertility or societal pressure to have children. These advertisements fail to acknowledge the many fulfilling paths a woman's life can take, and the immense contributions women make to society in various roles beyond motherhood.

This contradictory portrayal of females in advertisements creates a confusing and limiting narrative. Women are presented as either objects of desire or objects of domesticity, with little room for the multifaceted reality of the female experience. This not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also hinders progress towards a more equitable society where women are valued for their intellect, talent, and individuality, not just their bodies or maternal roles. However, there are signs of a new movement emerging within the advertising symphony. Brands are increasingly recognizing the importance of diversity and inclusion. Advertisements are featuring women of different ages, ethnicities, and body types, challenging the narrow beauty standards previously depicted. Furthermore, some commercials showcase women as CEOs, athletes, and artists, celebrating their accomplishments outside the realm of motherhood. Fortunately, a movement in the right direction is rising

within the advertising community. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the subtle melodies conducted by advertising. Brands are recognizing the importance of diversity and inclusion, featuring characters that defy the traditional gender binary. Mothers are depicted as accomplished professionals, and fathers are shown embracing their nurturing roles. This shift towards inclusivity signifies a redefinition of the canvas, one that celebrates the spectrum of human experience.

The current advertising symphony in India stands discordant, perpetuating a gender divide that stifles progress. Women are presented as either alluring objects or idealized mothers, a narrow definition that erases the vast spectrum of the female experience. To celebrate true diversity, a concerted effort is required. Brands must move beyond these tired tropes, embracing narratives that showcase the multifaceted nature of womanhood. Consumers, armed with critical thinking, can dismantle these stereotypes by demanding a more inclusive portrayal.

This transformation necessitates a multi-pronged approach. Firstly, brands must cultivate a deeper understanding of the female audience. Extensive market research, focus groups, and collaboration with feminist organizations can provide invaluable insights. By understanding the aspirations, anxieties, and lived experiences of women from diverse backgrounds, brands can craft narratives that resonate and inspire. Secondly, a shift in focus is paramount. Advertising must move beyond the superficial, celebrating women's achievements in various fields – science, technology, engineering, arts, and sports. Showcasing female entrepreneurs, athletes, artists, and leaders can serve as powerful role models for young girls and challenge societal expectations. Finally, diversity in casting is crucial. Featuring women of different ages, ethnicities, body types, and abilities dismantles the myth of a universal standard of beauty and celebrates the richness of the human experience. The key to dismantling the power of this uneven symphony lies in critical thinking. Consumers must become discerning viewers, aware of the narratives being presented and questioning their validity. Are the portrayals realistic? Do they represent the full spectrum of what it means to be a woman? or do they represent the full spectrum of human experience? By fostering these questions, we can break free from the limitations dictated by the advertising canvas, and We can move towards a more nuanced representation of femininity in advertising.

As consumers, we must cultivate a discerning eye towards advertising. By recognizing the persuasive techniques employed, we can make informed decisions about what influences us and how. Questioning the messages we see, researching products before succumbing to the allure, and remaining mindful of the narratives advertising creates are all steps towards becoming empowered consumers.

Advertising is a powerful force, but it does not have to dictate our reality. By understanding how it constructs gender roles and recognizing the limitations of these portrayals, we can become empowered viewers and advocates for a more inclusive future. Through this act of critical engagement, we can ensure that the advertising plays a more harmonious tune, one that celebrates the full spectrum of human experience. And one that celebrates the true diversity and complexity of the female experience. In this new composition, all voices can be heard, and the richness of human experience, in all its glorious diversity, can finally be celebrated. It is time to rewrite the narrative, one critical viewing session at a time, and ensure that women are not just seen but heard, valued for their multifaceted contributions to society.

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